

Crucifixion

13th Century Serbia

This striking fresco from the wall of the Studenica Monastery in Serbia from 1208-1209 is filled with a variety of bright colors that intensify this most singular tragic yet life-giving event in all of history.

Here the Lord is already dead and has endured terrible suffering without complaint in love for each of us sinners who have or will ever live. The Virgin Mary looks down with great sorrow and quiet resignation, while St. John the Beloved Disciple bends his head, resting his cheek on his hand, overcome with love and emotion.

The Centurion Longinus looks up at Christ and all that has just occurred and then exclaims in a confession of faith, "Truly this Man was the Son of God."

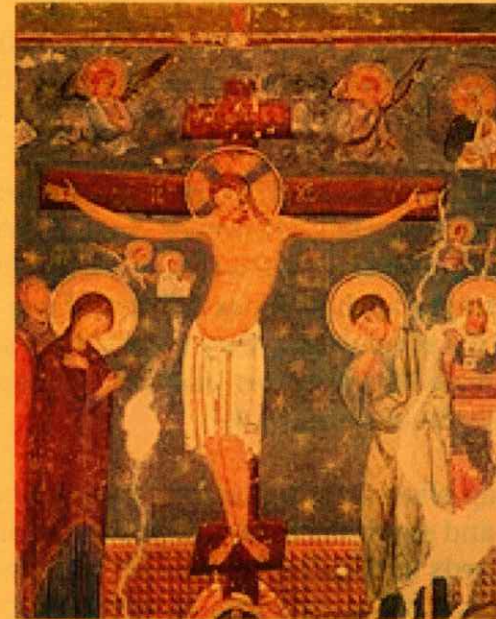
Two Angels look down with wonder, for this is a great act of love of God for His Creation, first in becoming incarnate, and then taking on this most humiliating and terrible death for the redemption of all mankind.

The Prophet Isaiah is above holding a scroll which has prophecies about our Saviour and Redeemer Jesus Christ. Behind Him is the blue sky with stars just above Jerusalem and the earth below.

Remember us, O Lord, in Thy Kingdom!

Sources for Praying with Icons: *Paths to Prayer* by Patricia D. Brown and <http://www.skete.com>

Praying with Icons



Crucifixion

We call them saints

when what we really often mean to say
is "icon," "star," "hero,"
ones so possessed by an internal vision
of divine goodness that they give us
a glimpse of the face of God
in the center of the human.
They give us a taste of the possibilities
of greatness in ourselves.

Joan Chittister, 1996, Erie, Pennsylvania

What is an Icon?

Icons are visual tools that tell the Christian story in images and color. They erase the borders of time and space to help people feel close to the people and events displayed in the images. When Icons reside in a place of worship, people stop to gaze or bow or light a candle. These movements are a significant part of their devotion and prayer.

Icons have long been a part of the Christian tradition, for both the Western and the Eastern Church. However, in the Western Church, which emphasized prayer as solely an inwardly focused activity, visual tools of prayer such as icons fell out of use in the Western Church. Where icons remained, they were simply seen as artwork rather than as an aid to prayer and worship. Icons are far more than artwork or colorful teaching tools.

Through their painstaking efforts, iconographers become bearers of the Church's memory and experience. Steeped in tradition, they adhere to the high standards of their craft. They create as an act of prayer, fasting, and meditation. The icon is strong and silent. No mouths are open and there are no physical details that suggest sound. There is also a minimum of detail in person and background. The simple lines pull the person at prayer into the icon, inviting the pray-er to experience the mystery that the icon depicts.

Many of us have difficulty praying. Our chaotic imagination races from one thought to another, and it can be hard to focus. Praying with an Icon can help one overcome difficulties. As a physical object, an icon invites us to pray with our eyes wide open, focusing our attention on images that point the way to God.

Icons help us get beyond words to connect with all that is holy by giving us a visual reminder of the mystery of God's immense love for us when words lack power and cannot express the full complexity of God. It is a way to ponder our faith and contemplate the fullness of the God whom we love.

Pray with an Icon ...

Begin by dimming the lights and lighting a candle.

Place the Icon so the candle illuminates the Icon.

Sit in a comfortable position and still your mind as you prepare to contemplate the nature of God.

Gaze with complete attention on the Icon ... over time you will begin to *see* the icon for yourself. You will uncover layers of symbolism that speaks to you deeply and powerfully of the unique way God has chosen to love you.

Common Symbolism of Colors:

- Blue: Heaven and mystery
- Red: Blood ... vitality, life, and beauty or Fire/Purification
- Purple: wealth and power
- White: purity and innocence
- Gold: sanctity, splendor, and the glory of God
- Green: fertility, vegetation
- Brown: earth, poverty

Questions for Reflection ...

Have you noticed any icons in your place of worship or in someone's home or in the community? Which one has captured your attention? Why?

Have you ever visited a church that uses icons as a tool for prayer? How did you feel? What was your initial reaction? What did you learn about yourself and your spiritual life from your experience?

What Icon would you have commissioned if you had the chance? What aspect of the Christian story would you wish to be reminded of? Why? What images and colors would your Icon hold? Where would you place it in your home? Why?